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■ LIBBY ASBESTOS

Medical bills for victims to top \$32M

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HELENA — Medical costs for people sickened by asbestos exposure in Libby are expected to top \$32.2 million over the next five years, new estimates show.

The report was presented Thursday to a task force of government and medical workers formed two years ago to find out how much health care for the hundreds of ill Libby residents might cost. Gov. Judy Martz's office paid for the study, which was prepared by a consulting firm in New Jersey that compiles statistics for insurance companies.

The study showed that medical costs over the next five years could run as high as \$90 million, but were more likely to be \$32.2 million.

That number could be a bit high, said Jim Buck, the presenter, because the study didn't account for people dying as it projected medical costs from 2005 through 2009.

Of the \$32.2 million likely costs, some \$10.5 million will be covered by W.R. Grace, the bankrupt owner of the shuttered

Libby vermiculite mine that was the source of widespread asbestos contamination in Libby.

W.R. Grace hired a company called Health Network America (HNA) to cover the medical costs of sickened residents who promised not to sue the company.

The rest of the bill — a projected \$21.7 million — is for people not covered by Grace. Some of those people are covered by Medicare and Medicaid or private insurance. Some are paying for themselves, while others are being treated for free at the hospital in Libby as a charity.

About half the money HNA has spent so far went to cover the medical bills of the 77 sickest people, the report showed.

Buck said he anticipated more people may fall sick with asbestos-related conditions as the population of Libby ages, but those new diagnoses are reflected in the \$32.2 million projections.

Jean Branscum, Martz's health care policy adviser,

said the study is significant because it shows how much money is still needed to take care of the people of Libby.

"That's the purpose of our two-year stint," Branscum told members of the task force in Thursday's conference call. "Where's the gap and who can plug the gap?"

Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Montana, has suggested creating a medical bill trust fund for Libby.

For years, Libby was home to a vermiculite mine that provided raw materials for insulation. The vermiculite was tainted with a particularly dangerous kind of asbestos, a mineral that causes lung disease and cancer if breathed in even small quantities.

Hundreds of people in Libby have died from asbestos related diseases and hundreds more are still sick, records show.

Libby is now the site of an Environmental Protection Agency Superfund cleanup.